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Reconstructionism- Strategy for a Brighter Future?

R. M. O. Pritchard

Confronted with the despair and destruction caused by the civil unrest in Northern Ireland, it is tempting to look to the school to provide hope for the future. After all, the children of today are the adults of tomorrow and it seems not unreasonable to hope that by exerting a positive influence over pliable human material, we can help to ensure a better future. One theory which accords very great importance to the school as an agent of cultural change and progress is that of reconstructionism. Here the responsibility of acting as principal change agent is laid upon the educational system.

There have been many definitions of reconstructionism, but it is proposed in this paper to adopt formulations which were put forward in the Northern Irish context. In "The Northern Teacher" Malcolm Skilbeck (1973) suggested that: "... the school can and should take an active part in assessing the worthwhileness of contemporary culture and in promoting what it takes to be educationally desirable changes in that culture", (p. 13). Although Skilbeck acknowledges that reconstructionism can take many different forms in different societies he goes on to comment that, "In the British tradition it is open to schools to define their own objectives - not in isolation, nor with complete freedom, but with a very wide scope for choice of direction and emphasis", (p. 16). It is further suggested that in the reconstructionist strategy, teachers are expected to consider themselves as agents of renewal and to learn to relate their work to the systematic analysis of contemporary cultural movements. It is the aim of the present paper to examine the justification for claiming that schools in general and teachers in particular should adopt a role consistent with the ideology which has just been outlined.

The philosophy of reconstructionism has emerged in its various forms in times of crisis. Few people would dispute that we are living in such a time but teachers must feel it especially sharply. In the prevailing confusion of society, the public makes more and more demands upon its teachers until eventually they become scapegoats. The insubordination of the young is blamed on schools "not doing their job properly". It is expected that teachers shall give education in morals and manners, education for family life, education for democracy, education for good citizenship, education for leisure, education for creativity, education for social change, and so on. The list is almost endless. Now it is claimed by the reconstructionists that teachers should substantially provide the dynamic for the changes which are to set right the deep-seated ills of our country. This demand not only imposes a burden

which many teachers may feel to be intolerable; it also raises ethical questions. These relate to the definition of educational objectives. In other countries it is usual for society to decide through representatives in the government, the ministry of education and the local community upon the ends which education shall be made to serve. The teacher's role is to provide the means by which these ends may be attained.

Compared with other countries, our teachers possess an almost unheard of degree of independence, and the reconstructionist would confer upon them still more. The school should promote "... what it takes to be educationally desirable changes in (contemporary) culture". Not many people in these islands would wish to see our teachers as circumscribed as certain of those in North America who, in order to give good service, had to promise to get eight hours sleep a night, to teach Sunday school, to abstain from dancing and never to fall in love. (Quoted by Waller, 1967, p.43). But are we not beginning to err in the opposite direction? Instead of allowing our teachers to promote the goals of society, we are actually asking that they become arbiters of these goals. Surely there could be no stronger indication of our abdication of responsibility? It is society which must take responsibility for its schools, not the other way round.

Let us suppose, however, that the school as an institution was quite willing to assume the responsibility for cultural renewal which is laid upon it by reconstructionism. Even then, a moment's thought will show obvious difficulties and limitations in the playing of such a role by the school.

The school has never been notable for its sensitivity to the demands of society. Indeed it would be more accurate to say that its failure to respond promptly to the demand for change is quite notorious. Paul Mort (1964) has estimated that an extravagantly long time elapses before an insight into a need is responded to by innovations destined for general acceptance in the school. This period is measured in decades. Mort himself quotes as an example of his contention the long period of lapse between Pasteur's discoveries and the Flexner report. In education, it is difficult to find issues about which there clusters a sufficient degree of consensus for them to be termed "needs".

Nevertheless there are some trends, both in school administration and in teaching methodology, which seem to be gaining ground in Western Europe. Take for example comprehensive schools. Although some people view them as an instrument for achieving social justice, the controversy which surrounds them is still so intense that one would think the whole idea was brand new. Yet it was as long ago as 1937 that the

T.U.C. advocated a scheme which would bring all types of school under one roof. Another illustration of time lag is furnished by the methodology of teaching foreign languages. It was at the beginning of this century that Otto Jespersen proposed the "direct method" and the practice of speech rather than of grammatical paradigms. The principle is only now beginning to gain widespread acceptance.

The phenomenon of the excessive time lag in schools' adoption of new ideas may be connected with the way in which compulsory education was initiated. The spirit in which an institution is founded tends to exercise a pervasive influence for a very long time. Indeed some researchers believe that an organisation can never emancipate itself completely from its origins. In the case of compulsory education, the purpose of the initiators was a most explicitly conservative one. It was acknowledged that, in order to participate in industrial society, children needed to be literate and numerate, but every precaution was taken to see that education would not raise people above their station in life. It was forbidden to teach certain subjects (e.g. foreign languages) in elementary education; in this way any approximation to a "noble", liberal education was avoided and the essentially limited, instrumental role of education for the masses was emphasised.

It must, however, be admitted that this has changed. Education has been for some time an agent of social mobility, with the attendant consequence that teachers have been able to influence entry to the universities and the professions. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that this change was *not* accomplished by the volition of the school itself. It was brought about by the larger society of which the educational system is a part. Olive Banks (1955) in her review of these developments points out that: "... development within secondary education has had to wait upon changes in the social structure". There was, therefore, no question of autonomous action being undertaken by the school in an effort to bring about a more just society. Rather, school was invested with the power to accomplish what society wanted.

Reconstructionists claim that schools should define their own objectives and might well cite teacher influence upon social mobility as one of the most remarkable instances of the school's power to change society. It is therefore important to realise that the direction of causation ran from society to school and not vice versa. Even if the end result was that school and society influenced each other reciprocally, the fact remains that the initial impetus for change came from the larger society and not merely from

educationalists. In parenthesis, it may be remarked that the power of school teachers to affect the system of social stratification will soon be greatly reduced. Vocational decisions are increasingly taking place at the stage of third level education and so terminal allocation will no longer be the prerogative of the secondary school teachers.

The efficiency of teachers as possible change agents will naturally depend upon teachers' attitudes to innovation. Do they accept or repudiate the role of innovator? How anxious are they to be able to exert some power over the society in which they work? Reconstructionist writers implicitly ascribe to teachers a role of considerable sophistication and complexity. Where this has seemed too far removed from reality, there is much insistence upon the necessity of in-service courses to make good the deficit. George Kneller (1964) expresses in a succinct manner what the reconstructionist demands from the educationalist: "Education must commit itself here and now to the creation of a new social order that will fulfil the basic values of our culture and at the same time harmonise with the underlying social and economic forces of the modern world", (p.62). This virtually amounts to an elevation of education above society. It lays upon teachers as the agents of education some fairly staggering tasks: they must discern clearly the basic values of their own culture and must diagnose the major social and economic forces of the modern world; they must then use these insights to create a new and more worthwhile society.

Certain research findings help us to predict how teachers are likely to respond to such demands. The literature on the implementation of innovation within the schools themselves should give some clue as to how teachers would perform in innovating on a more radical level. It has been found for example that teaching tends to attract rather conservative individuals. Tudhope's U.S.A. investigation (1939-45) showed that teachers were characterised by an unadventurous spirit. Davis (1964) in a survey of 33,000 pupils who wanted to take up teaching found them to be predominantly "conventional in opinions and values". It has also been found that, far from providing the impetus for change, teachers often support reform only half-heartedly. Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman (1959) conclude that, "To expect individuals at lower levels in an organisation to exercise control over the establishment of over-all goals is unrealistic".

Since the available research on internal school reforms indicates that teachers are unenthusiastic innovators it would seem unreasonable, in the face of

discouraging findings, to cast teachers in the role of catalysts of change, destined to transform the whole of their society. It is true that all teachers have been the recipients of third level education, but this fact does not necessarily mean that they are qualified to provide solutions for the most intransigent problems of mankind. They may have neither the requisite capacity nor desire to perform such a task. Jackson (1968) in his analysis of teachers reached some rather controversial conclusions. He found that teacher subculture discourse was characterised by a conceptual simplicity which tended to spurn elaborate words and ideas. The teachers tended to hold an uncomplicated view of causality, and to adopt an intuitive rather than a rational approach to classroom events. When confronted with alternative teaching practice they usually adopted an opinionated stance. Hargreaves (1972) in his study of staffroom relationships diagnosed tendencies which are similar to those observed by Jackson. In particular, Hargreaves pinpoints attitudes by cynicism and anti-intellectualism. He notes that it is against the staffroom norm to enter into profound discussions of educational issues "... unless it is of a narrow curricular focus or concerned with the latest policies of the head, the Local Authority or the Ministry of Education. Nor are teachers expected to read books on education which is regarded as a student activity". If there is substance to these assertions, then to put it mildly, the teacher is not exactly the reconstructionist's ideal tool for bringing about change.

If teachers can change society at all it is only indirectly by influencing the young. Let us consider how successful they are in attempting to exert such influence and in particular let us consider the other forces which compete with the school for the allegiance of the young. The word "compete" is used here advisedly. It is intended thus to emphasise the lack of consensus which is endemic in a pluralistic society. Apart from the school, the major forces which influence a child are surely the family and the peer group. It is the family which accomplishes the primary socialisation of the child and, although the school too has a role to play, it can never accomplish more than a process of secondary socialisation. We acknowledge this tacitly in all kinds of ways when we talk about a child being quite "at home" in class, or about a lesson "getting home" to him. The new pupil has to wrestle with a frame of reference which is alien to that which he has lived in before coming to school. He tries to achieve a rapprochement between the two frames of reference, but if he fails, the overwhelming likelihood is that he will drop his affiliation to school rather than to family.

In later childhood, the peer group becomes very important and may even rival the family in influence. One thing is certain however. The influence of the school is most unlikely to weigh as heavily as either family or peer group. This is authenticated by research. Coleman (1961) asked pupils which of the following things would be hardest for them to take:

- the disapproval of parents
- the disapproval of a teacher
- breaking with a friend

Over half said that parental disapproval would cause them most chagrin; about 40% said that breaking with the friend would be worst. This leaves a minute percentage which felt that the disapproval of their teacher was an event of major significance. Indeed the teachers themselves seem aware of their relative powerlessness. In a German survey (Hammer, 1975), teachers were asked whether they believed the school could counteract family influences that were harmful. An overwhelming 96% answered "No". Such findings would be of no importance if the values of the family concurred with those of the school, but this is frequently not the case. Sociological research points to a clash between school and home value systems as a major factor in children's underachievement. The fact that major social agencies are incapable of taking a synoptic view of things is bound to thwart the best efforts of the reconstructionist.

The value system of the school may often clash with that of the home. There is reason to believe that it also clashes with that of society. In a strange way, school is in society but not truly *of* society. Our society has espoused democracy, but has the school followed suit? Let us consider three organisational typologies put forward by Etzioni (1961).

- (1) The first typology is the *coercive*. This is characteristic of prisons and mental hospitals. The members of the institution do not want to be there at all. They are alienated. The only basis of institutional authority resides in its power to inflict punishment.
- (2) The second typology is the *utilitarian*. This is characteristic of industry. The members are motivated by the desire to earn as much money as possible. The basis of institutional authority resides in its legal and reward power.
- (3) The third typology is the *normative*. This is characteristic of universities, churches and hospitals. The members are motivated by their common commitment to the organisation's goals, and this fact constitutes in itself the authority of the institution.

Let us now attempt to apply these typologies to the school. The teachers probably see their organisation from a utilitarian normative perspective, but since the pupils are the seeds of the future, and since the reconstructionists ultimately hope to influence them, we must look at the school from the pupil perspective. Can there be much doubt that for most children, school is predominantly a *coercive* institution? How can we hope to maintain our influence over children and persuade them to co-operate in a reconstructionist design if we raise them in institutions whose value system is in direct contradiction to that of the larger society? It is surely little wonder that many of the pupils become hostile to "education" and manifest such symptoms as truancy and vandalism. The hierarchical structure and coercive power system of the school are in danger of alienating teachers and pupils to such an extent that their mutual relationship will simply cease to be viable. Even in the narrow instrumental sense there is evidence that schools either interpret pupils' needs differently from pupils themselves, or else refuse to cater for those needs. Schools Council Enquiry I on Young School Leavers shows that whereas school principals and teachers emphasise goals like moral development and social skills, pupils and their parents stress goals like examination success and preparation for careers. The truth is that school, far from being finely attuned to society, tends to become a sort of repository for ideals which adults no longer wholeheartedly believe in but are reluctant to jettison. Waller (1967) called it a "museum of virtue". Lack of consensus not just between the school and other social forces, but also within the school itself makes the outlook for the school as an agent of reconstructionism indeed bleak.

For the school to be an agent of reconstruction, we would have to envisage a type of society rather different from the pluralistic one in which we live. Emile Durkheim had something of the instinct of a reconstructionist when he envisaged the teacher as responsible for maintaining a moral consensus in a secular society. This, however, presupposes a consensus of values among teachers which simply does not exist. Of course, one way of achieving a working consensus would be through force or intimidation; the reconstructionist however is pledged to democratic means of attaining his objectives. If wholesale reconstructionism were to be adopted in a democratic society, we would have the paradox of every teacher having been somehow cudgelled into accepting a reconstructionist philosophy and yet being obliged to "convince his pupils of the validity of the reconstructionist solution . . . with scrupulous regard for democratic procedures". (Kneller 1971,

p.64). It is no coincidence that reconstructionism has always been characteristic of times of crisis. At such times there are always some people who long for the firm hand of a dictator to put things in order. When we examine the practicality of adopting a reconstructionist solution to our problems, it seems that it could hardly be made functional without recourse to procedures which would be at best undemocratic, and at worst dictatorial. Democracy looks precarious enough in Northern Ireland. To adopt a reconstructionist policy even with the express intention of promoting democracy might only have the unwelcome effect of jeopardising democratic values still further.

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